Consultants Break Down Problems

Idea In Short

Management consultants break down complex problems for executives by following structured approaches—working backward from goals, applying frameworks, and partnering with clients to clarify issues. They organize chaos into manageable parts, validate assumptions, and leverage tools like DMAIC or profitability analysis to identify root causes and key drivers. The diversity of consulting projects demands adaptability, critical thinking, and collaborative teamwork. By iteratively refining hypotheses and sharing insights, consultants deliver tailored solutions that create lasting organizational impact.

Management consultants are in the business of helping executives break down problems, make difficult decisions, and create change. This article focuses on the second part: breaking down problems.

The diversity of consulting work can be surprising to newcomers. Projects vary by industry, client type, function, geography, duration, and purpose. Each project is unique, with different elements, business cycles, and roles for consultants.

For newly hired consultants, this diversity can be both exciting and disorienting. They may wonder where to start, what's within scope, and how to be competent among more experienced colleagues. To address these concerns, consultants can follow several strategies:

1. Follow the consulting process: Once a proposal and statement of work are in place, consultants have initial ideas on how to approach the solution. They have hypotheses, client interactions, and preliminary research to build upon
2. Work backwards from the goal: Consultants need to be efficient with their time. They should always keep in mind the project's purpose, considering what success looks like, who the decision-maker is, and potential risks and scenarios
3. Open up the problem slowly: It's important to be thoughtful and ensure the right

problem is being solved. Consultants should consider obstacles, false assumptions, stakeholders, and whether the client's metrics are measuring the right things

4. Listen (and don't listen) to the client: Clients may not always accurately diagnose their own problems. Consultants should ask good questions and leverage their broader experience and objectivity
5. Use frameworks to find key drivers: Various approaches, tools, and frameworks can help simplify complex problems into their key drivers. Examples include DMAIC, RACI, SIPOC, CTQ, fishbone diagrams, and profitability analysis
6. Use management tools: Bain & Company's studies on frequently used management tools can provide valuable insights into problem-solving approaches
7. Put things in "buckets": Organizing chaos into sensible groups is a core consulting skill
8. Refine hypotheses: Consulting involves iteratively improving initial guesses based on research, client feedback, and analysis
9. Divide up the work: Consulting is a team effort, with different tasks assigned based on experience and expertise
10. Share thinking with clients: Consultants work collaboratively with clients, involving them in the process and ensuring buy-in from diverse stakeholders.

Following these strategies, consultants can effectively break down complex problems and provide valuable solutions to their clients.

Summary

Consultants help clients break down problems by combining process discipline with analytical tools and collaborative engagement. They clarify objectives, challenge assumptions, segment issues into logical “buckets,” and apply proven frameworks to simplify complexity. Active listening, iterative hypothesis testing, and teamwork ensure a thorough, objective approach. By methodically structuring problems and openly sharing their thinking, consultants facilitate effective decision-making and drive meaningful change for organizations across industries and functions.